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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 000289

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/ARP AND G/TIP

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TAGS: ELAB PHUM PREL PGOV KWMN KTIP SA RP

SUBJECT: DEPUTY LABOR MINISTER DENIES HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN KINGDOM, SAYS SAUDI JOB MARKET RELATIVELY UNAFFECTED BY GLOBAL ECONOMIC DOWNTURN

Classified By: Charge D'Affaires Sandra Muench for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Key Points

-- Deputy Labor Minister denied human trafficking is a problem in Saudi Arabia.

-- He asserted Saudi women are active participants in the workforce, unless they choose to abstain for social reasons.

Comment

12. (C) We found it bizarre that the Deputy Minister would repeatedly and emphatically deny the existence of human trafficking when many other Saudi officials working on this issue have been willing to discuss the problem, and what they are doing about it, with us. Our best guess is that the issue is sensitive, and his denials probably were intended as a defensive tactic rather than a statement of Saudi government policy. He did not deny the existence of problems that the USG considers trafficking; however, his attempt to describe gross labor violations as relatively uncommon, perhaps revealed a lack of sensitivity to the very real suffering of some foreign workers in Saudi Arabia. End comment.

13. (C) On February 9, Econcouns met Deputy Labor Minister for Planning and Development Dr. Mufarraj Saad bin al-Haqbani for a courtesy call. Al-Haqbani spoke extensively on the Saudi labor market, women in the Saudi workforce, and addressed reports of trafficking in persons in Saudi Arabia.

Financial crisis so far
not increasing unemployment

14. (C) The Deputy Labor Minister expressed optimism for the new U.S. administration and said he hoped the world economy would recover soon from the recent crisis. With regard to job losses in Saudi Arabia, al-Haqbani said there have not been many layoffs and in general, Saudi employment is not extremely affected by this crisis "as you are in the United States." He also said the Ministry of Labor has drafted a new, job-creating labor strategy that is before the Saudi Supreme Economic Council.

Saudi women who want jobs
(many don't) can get them

15. (C) Al-Haqbani said the numbers of women working are increasing every year as more women are obtaining advanced degrees. He also said women are encouraged to work and are employed in many sectors, including as healthcare professionals, as administrators, and in finance and education. (Note: In December, the Saudi Gazette reported that the Ministry of Labor informed companies that the employment of one Saudi woman is the equivalent of two Saudi men in terms of fulfilling the private sector's Saudization requirement to have 70% of a company's employees be Saudi citizens. End note.) Al-Haqbani also noted that while the female unemployment rate nominally hover around 23%, the actual number is significantly lower since women in Saudi Arabia frequently choose not to work. He acknowledged that there was social pressure not to work but also noted that many Saudi women prefer not to work because that decision is viewed by Saudis as conferring status on the woman and her family. Al-Haqbani emphasized these women's decision to stay home and "be taken care of" by their fathers or husbands is "not because of workplace discrimination, and it is not because of religious reasons. It is purely for social reasons."

Deputy Labor Minister
Denies trafficking problem

16. (C) When asked about the incidence of trafficking in persons in the Kingdom, al-Haqbani became agitated and

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forcefully denied that trafficking occurs in Saudi Arabia. (Note: This contravenes other SAG communications which acknowledge trafficking, although not the full extent of the problem. End Note.) He said, "If you have 5 million foreign workers in the Kingdom, and 2 thousand complain, how can you say that is a problem?" He added that the ambassador of the Philippines recently told the Minister of Labor that 98% of Filipinos working in the Kingdom report that they are content with conditions here. The Deputy Labor Minister further expressed disdain for the definition of trafficking as including restrictions on freedom of movement, withholding of wages or passports, and physical abuse by employers.

MUENCH